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# Obscenity: News Articles (1989): News Article 10

Elizabeth Kastor

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# *Funding Art That Offends*

## NEA Under Fire Over Controversial Photo

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By Elizabeth Kastor  
Washington Post Staff Writer

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A New York artist's photograph that toured the country in a traveling show has entangled the National Endowment for the Arts and Congress in a tense debate over taste, freedom of expression and the role government should play in supporting potentially controversial art.

The Andres Serrano photograph—which many people find offensive, Christians in particular—is of Christ on a crucifix submerged in a container of the artist's urine.

It was included in an exhibit funded by a state arts group that in turn received funding from the NEA. Since Sen. Alphonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.) and Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) took to the Senate floor last month to attack the picture and to question the NEA's funding procedures, about 50 senators and 150 representatives have contacted the NEA about it, according to the agency.

NEA's acting chairman, Hugh

See NEA, C3, Col. 1

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June 7, 1989

POST

# Art Grants

NEA, From C1

Southern, sent a response to some of those members of Congress yesterday outlining NEA's grant-making process and promising to explore the issue further.

"I most certainly can understand that the work in question has offended many people and appreciate the feelings of those who have protested it," he wrote. "I personally found it offensive."

But Southern went on to explain that the legislation establishing the NEA forbids it from interfering with the content of the work the NEA helps fund. The NEA, he wrote, is "discussing this issue with our National Council, and other concerned individuals. We have been in touch with our Congressional oversight committees on this matter and have agreed that together, we will review our process to ensure that Endowment processes are effective and maintain the highest artistic integrity and quality."

Southern also asked that the controversy over one grant be taken in the context of the 80,000 grants the NEA has given in its nearly 25-year history.

The controversy comes at a particularly delicate time for the NEA. The White House is currently selecting a replacement for former chairman Frank Hodsoll. The 1990 budget is still under consideration on the Hill, and Congress will soon begin the NEA's reauthorization process, a mandated review that takes place every five years.

Some NEA staff members and other arts activists are worried that the dispute could adversely affect NEA appropriations, or encourage Congress to interfere with the way the agency selects which groups and artists receive its grants.

"I do think there is a clear distinction between freedom of expression as a concept, which is something I would defend forever, and the limit or license to use the taxpayers' money in a way that may be totally objectionable to a great many people," said former NEA chairman Livingston Biddle. "I think this is a time for standing back a little and looking at what's involved. The life of the National Endowment could be involved."

A potentially controversial show scheduled to open July 1 at the Corcoran Gallery of Art also has aroused some concern in artistic circles. The show is of pictures by the late photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, much of whose work is extremely explicit, with homoerotic and violent images scattered amid more traditional nudes, portraits and pictures of flowers. Although the show, organized by a Philadelphia museum that received a \$30,000 grant from the NEA, has appeared in Philadelphia and other cities with no problems, some in the District arts community are reportedly concerned that it could fuel more criticism of the NEA even though the Corcoran installation received no NEA funding.

Corcoran director Christina Orr-Cahal said she has heard rumors that the museum was reconsidering the exhibit, but said she had no such plans. "This is the work of a major American artist who's well known, so we're not doing anything out of the ordinary." Orr-Cahal said that

the museum's decision to schedule the exhibit for summer was partly influenced by the fact that there will be no school tours of the museum then. She said she expects the Corcoran to display "advisories" about the show's suitability for children.

The NEA played no role in actually choosing Serrano to receive a grant. In 1987, a five-member jury including Hirshhorn curator Ned Rifkin selected Serrano and nine others to receive \$15,000 fellowships from the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, as part of a program the NEA has helped support at the Winston-Salem institution since 1981. The picture was among work by the 10 artists later included in the traveling exhibit that concluded at the Virginia Museum of Fine Art in Richmond in January 1989.

Serrano's pictures are frequently connected with religious images, and he describes his work as being "ongoing investigations of such bodily fluids as milk, blood and urine." A large part of the furor the Serrano picture aroused is over its title, "Piss Christ."

Rifkin said yesterday that Serrano's "work is very strong. Obviously it's strong because it's elicited this kind of reaction. It's interesting to me that art still has this power." Serrano has exhibited in a number of galleries and museums, and Ted Potter, director of the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, described him as "an established artist." "Heaven and Hell" and "Milk, Blood"—two other Serrano pictures—are now on display in the National Museum of American Art's "The Photography of Invention."

"The process of nominating artists from around the country, and these nominations going forward to a national jury, is really carefully done and really impeccable," Potter said. "The juries here have always been of the top echelon of American contemporary art, and this was no exception, and they did an outstanding job."

Arts professionals had been hoping that the Serrano dispute would fade so that they would not be forced to stake out a position in a clash between religious sensitivities and artistic experimentation—an age-old, perhaps insoluble argument.

On the one side stand D'Amato, Helms and the Mississippi Christian group American Family Association, which in April launched a letter-writing campaign to the NEA and—more significantly—to members of Congress.

D'Amato has called Serrano's picture "a despicable, despicable display of vulgarity," and wrote to the NEA: "This matter does not involve freedom of artistic expression—it does involve the question whether American taxpayers should be forced to support such trash."

On the other side are arrayed arts administrators and others who are disturbed by the prospect of the government funding only conventional, tame art that will be widely accepted.

"I think that controversy has always been endemic to art, that certainly it's been endemic to 20th-century art," said Susan Lubowsky, director of the NEA Visual Arts Program, which funded the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art. "Even as far back as Caravaggio, people complained because he painted the Virgin too naturalistically with dirty feet."

"I think that discussion of obscenity and propriety are endemic to art because art is always on the cutting edge, and anything that's on the cutting edge is going to offend someone."